

# A Great Need, A Greater Investment

America was founded, and has flourished, as a land of opportunity—a place where, by working hard and seizing opportunities, each generation can do better than the last. But this very American notion seems frayed, as the effects of economic recession have taken a terrible toll on our kids and the schools they depend upon.

The United States is the world's wealthiest nation, yet census figures released last week show that 20 million Americans are in "deep poverty"—trying to survive on about \$200 a week. Poverty affects 16.4 million children—more than one in five. The poverty rates for African-American and Hispanic children are far higher—38.2 and 35 percent, respectively. And suburban poverty has soared.

In the midst of this, America's public school teachers strive every day to help create educational opportunity for our children, even as they see their own ranks depleted (300,000 education positions have been slashed since 2008). In the classrooms I visited across the country on the opening days of the school year, nobody was missing a beat. I witnessed serious, interesting instruction, with students and educators alike focused and engaged. At Lake Worth High School in Palm Beach County, Fla., I attended a class at the school's medical academy, which prepares students for college and career (and met an aspiring brain surgeon paving the way to her goal). I visited West Virginia's first community school, which, through in-school health and family services, after-school enrichment, state-of-the-art technology and year-round schooling, is providing opportunities for students, their families and the community. During my visit to Freeport, N.Y., a diverse district on Long Island, I got a dose of military discipline in an ROTC classroom and a Spanish lesson with first-graders in a dual-language immersion program—both valued programs the district has struggled to maintain as millions of dollars have been cut from school funding.

At the same time, I saw many threats to teachers' best efforts. Most everywhere I went, I observed large class sizes; met educators struggling to keep art, music and sports programs for their students; and heard fears that things could get even

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worse. Teachers are doing everything in their power to keep the impact of budget cuts as far from the classroom as possible. Many educators across the country are in effect subsidizing children's education by taking salary cuts and furloughs, and working longer hours without additional pay. Many teachers and support personnel buy food for hungry students, spending an average of \$25 a month for this purpose. Educators are heroic and should be celebrated, but this is neither a sustainable nor a rational way to provide our children with equal access to a great education.

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## Diminished educational opportunities carry lifelong implications.

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Economists warn that the worst effects on public education could be ahead, as many states cut both taxes and school budgets, federal assistance to states expires, and tax bases continue to shrink with the collapse of the housing market. And, unless many more Americans can get back to work, we will be unable to sustain necessary investments in public education and other vital services.

All this cries out for quick congressional action on the economic plan President Obama has proposed, which wisely calls for investment in jobs and programs that will address America's rebuilding and infrastructure needs, including the repair and modernization of schools, and ensure that students will have the teachers they need. States and school districts must do their part, as well, to undo the damage and prevent further harm from years of cuts to public education and social services. There is no pause button on a child's education. Diminished educational opportunities carry lifelong implications.

America's public schools truly are the public's schools; they are given the responsibility of educating all children and imparting the knowledge, values and skills required for full civic participation, and depend upon—and reflect—the support of the larger community. With proper support, our schools can provide kids with unbounded opportunities. Without such support, we are diminished as individuals and as a nation.

Our children need so much—whether to overcome the challenges many experience, or because all children will need new and advanced skills to make it in the knowledge economy and lead fulfilling lives. America faces tough choices. We must always remember that, ultimately, the benefits of choosing to help our children significantly outweigh the costs.



Photo John Lewis

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Randi Weingarten with Skylia Jackson from the Archer Street School in Freeport, N.Y.

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